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REMAINING — FIRST IN ASIA —

The importance of SOF maintaining access and influence in contested domains.

BY COLONEL GUILLAUME BEAURPERE

“The center of military power in the world is moving to Asia. The reason: sustained capitalist expansion leads to military acquisitions. As states consolidate their institutions at home and do more trade and business abroad, they seek militaries in order to defend their new interests. Asian states like China, Japan and Vietnam are no longer internally focused, but projecting power out — and thus their territorial claims clash and overlap.”

— Robert Kaplan, *“Asia’s Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific”*⁰¹

Philippine Soldiers assigned to the 18th Special Forces group and U.S. Army Special Forces Soldiers assigned to the 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) board a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter to conduct helocast operations during Exercise Balikatan, at Fort Magsaysay, Philippines.

U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SGT. MARTY BORTON

United States strategic access and influence in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region is slowly eroding. The post-Cold War hegemonic power no longer enjoys military, economic or even information supremacy in this complex region. Adversaries are asserting their influence, and even deliberately undermining U.S. access, while traditional partners, including allies, are balancing and hedging amidst increasing great power competition. Alfred Thayer Mahan’s geopolitical study *“The Problem of Asia”* foresaw a strategic shift in the 20th century geopolitical map from the West to Asia.⁰² This ground-breaking work highlighted the impending competition between the land power of Central Asia and the Western colonial and trading nations whose interests lay along the periphery of the Asian continent. Today, in the early decades of the 21st century, we begin to grasp the strategic meaning of Mahan’s lucid visualization of the world map.

Asia’s economic resurgence and financial strengths as both consumer and producer over the last two decades have reinforced the international relations theory of a shift in global power. Asian leaders and even U.S. politicians have regularly referred to the Asian Century and scholars often argue the merits of this theory based on population demographics, economic performance and growth of science and technology. Global power shifts are strategically significant, since historically they seldom occur without major changes in international norms. A pivot to Asia as a new center of global power will inevitably displace or restructure existing Western-led security and economic orders. The so-called ‘Thucydides Trap’ that ensues poses a challenge to the U.S. as the status quo power. Should the U.S. contain or resist the power shift or adapt and adjust its strategy to accommodate the rise of peer adversaries?⁰³ The U.S. is now at a critical strategic junction in Asia.



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01 A newly constructed classroom building at the Jaffna Hindu Ladies College in Sri Lanka is decorated for an opening ceremony. The Civil Military Support Element nominated the project for funding through the U.S. Embassy.

02 Immediately following the groundbreaking on the U.S. building, the Chinese began construction of a classroom building overlooking the U.S. facility. The giant structure towers over the other buildings on the campus but the construction was done quickly with little attention to detail or quality. The college now teaches the students English and Chinese.

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS BY
JENNIFER G. ANGELO



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To effectively trace a path forward, the U.S. National Command Authority needs to maintain a deep understanding of the Asian environment and wield influence. This requires persistent access and engagement with key indigenous partners in the region, expanding well beyond the five major U.S. non-NATO allies. Small, discrete forces must remain forward postured able to quickly aggregate with key enablers to respond to potential crisis or conflict. Army Special Operations Forces can provide this range of capabilities to both Joint Force Commanders and U.S. Ambassadors. This article will describe the complexity of the threat environment in Asia and the application of ARSOF capabilities through cross-functional teams.⁰⁴ It then offers a range of critical readiness tasks at a time of increased tension in the region. Bringing years of combat experience and innovative approaches to modern warfare with indigenous forces, USSOF enjoys a significant level of respect among many Asian nations. ARSOF brings cultural and language expertise, an important factor in navigating the diverse Human Domain of the region. This allows for SOF employment in the seams, or gray areas, of great power competition in a region fraught with challenges to U.S. interests.

THE THREAT ENVIRONMENT IN ASIA

State adversaries, violent extremist organizations and transnational criminal networks all combine to make Asia one of the most complex regions for our military to operate. All four adversaries described in the National Military Strategy — China, North Korea, Russia and Iran — as well as the ubiquitous threat from terrorist groups such as

al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (better known as ISIS) are to varying degrees present in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region. Among these, the most prevalent challenge to U.S. access and influence is the re-emergence of the Chinese 'Middle Kingdom'. The People's Republic of China is nearing regional economic, informational and military hegemony. Across Asia, the U.S. military is now persistently operating in its sphere of influence. Chinese is becoming the *lingua franca* of Asia, studied and spoken by many of Asia's educated populations. The PRC, simply by its sheer size and proximity, can shape the actions of its neighbors through diplomatic or economic power bolstered by human movement that permeates the very fabric of regional societies. Overseas Chinese, especially in Southeast Asia, shape the social and economic landscape in the operational environment. But the challenge from China is not the only a threat to U.S. interests, and certainly not the most imminent.

Over the past decade, the Kim Jung-Un Regime in North Korea has rapidly developed long-range ballistic missile capabilities. Most worrisome is its apparent race to demonstrate to the world that it is now a fully-capable nuclear power. As increased UN sanctions against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea take their toll, many observers believe the Kim Regime will increasingly turn to transnational criminal networks and illicit trafficking to sustain its economy and weapons development program.⁰⁵ The danger is in the DPRK deliberately selling its weapons of mass destruction to violent extremist organizations or to other U.S. adversaries with equal aspirations towards nuclear weapons. So not only does the U.S. face a threat of North Korean nuclear weapons being launched towards the homeland, it also faces the complexities of proliferation in the region and beyond.



In South Asia and through the archipelago nations of Southeast Asia, the threat of rekindled violent Islamic extremism looms large. As the seat of the ISIS so-called Caliphate collapses in the Middle East, returning Foreign Fighters combined with a hyper active globalized media network are slowly serving to coalesce previously disparate violent extremist organizations under one common banner. Whether truly ideologically linked or franchising off of a perceived successful radical Islamic cult, the threat has clearly migrated to Asia. The region witnessed the latest manifestation in the seizure of the Muslim city of Marawi in the Southern Philippines by the Maute Group who declared allegiance to ISIS. There are decades-old tensions between Buddhists and Muslims in places like the Northern Rakhine State of Burma or in the separatist violence of Thailand's southern provinces, all of which threaten to undermine the spirit of cooperation in ASEAN and create environments ripe for radicalization. For the USSOF, opportunities abound for counter violent extremism and counterterrorism partnerships with several Asian nations.

There are other potential flash points in this vastly complex and dynamic region. Asia's economic growth has directly contributed to an increase in regional military modernization and expansion. India, when not preoccupied by the threat from its nuclear neighbor Pakistan, is keen to counter the rise of Chinese influence on its periphery.⁸⁶ Japan and China continue to maneuver over conflicting interests in the Senkaku Island chain in the East China Sea. Similar disputes exist between China and several Southeast Asian nations in the South China Sea. Democracy in Thailand remains a fragile proposition and military dominance in Myanmar's

internal affairs is once again resurging. Any one of these potential crisis points could drag the U.S. into regional conflict. Given deep and growing economic interdependence in the region, the need for U.S. forward posturing and situational awareness is more critical than ever.

CROSS FUNCTIONAL ARSOF TEAMS

The integration of the only Active Duty 95th Civil Affairs Brigade as well as the 4th and 8th Military Information Support Groups under the 1st Special Forces Command now provides USSOCOM and geographic combatant commanders a unique Army Special Operations Forces Division capable of training, equipping and deploying cross-functional, purpose-built Special Warfare teams across the globe. The cross-functional ARSOF team is now consistently exercised and validated through combat training center rotations where Special Forces Operational Detachments-Alpha, Civil Military Support Elements and Military Information Support Teams are achieving effects — often in denied areas — to enable the movement, maneuver, fires and intelligence functions of conventional forces. These teams are also critical to shaping the environment for stability and support operations post-conflict or hostilities and provide commanders a deeper understanding of the security, governance and informational aspects of the human terrain. The teams are regionally aligned and bring a depth of language and cultural expertise unique to these formations. The 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne), headquartered at Joint Base Lewis-McChord with one battalion forward-stationed in Okinawa, has been regionally aligned in Asia since June 1957.

The employment of these SOF teams in Asia is a central component of a theater-engagement strategy and support to campaign activities. CMSE and MIST teams are now operating in areas where U.S. military-to-military security cooperation is restricted or limited due to host-nation policy constraints. These teams are skilled at nesting

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Members of 1st SFG(A) conduct joint training with partner forces in Thailand.
U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY JASON GAMBARELLA

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with Ambassador and U.S. Country Team objectives, and usually enjoy broad freedom of movement across the host nation. SFODAs and SFODBs are the foundational elements that have sustained decades-long SOF partnerships across Asia. These SOF engagements reinforce alliances with units such as the Republic of Korea Special Warfare Command, the Special Operations Command of the Philippine Army and the Royal Thai Army Special Warfare Command. More recently, U.S. Special Forces Soldiers have helped build and train specialized units from the ground up like the Mahabir Rangers in Nepal. With the assistance of USSOF, this unit has grown into a Regiment and possesses some of the most capable crisis response and humanitarian assistance capabilities of the Nepal Army. Similar initiatives exist across the region from counterterrorism units in Indonesia and Malaysia to crisis response and UN Peacekeeping support units in Mongolia.

ARSOF cross-functional teams also bring very recent combat experience from Operations Inherent Resolve and Resolute Support. The tactics, techniques and procedures developed during these conflicts are now transferring back into Asia to advise, assist and in some cases enable U.S. indigenous partners to be more effective against a range of threats from terrorist groups to state adversaries. The complexity of the 21st Century battlefield now requires SOF to support a range of military operations from combat and information operations to support to stability and governance.

The integration of Psychological Operations and Civil Affairs experts into traditional SOF teams led by SFODAs is now increasingly the template for supporting the Joint Force. The ability to posture teams across the theater, who can quickly aggregate at a crisis point and time, provides an important asset to theater commanders and U.S. Country Teams. First and foremost, these small teams

can provide immediate situational awareness by virtue of persistent presence. Looking at local and regional problems through the eyes of indigenous partners can provide a depth of understanding and even influence on a crisis that national security decision makers may not have considered. This was the case during the 2015 Nepal earthquake that struck while ARSOF was on the ground training with the Nepalese Army. Second, the forward positioning of SOF teams provides advanced support to a Joint Force response. This is increasingly exercised in Asia with ARSOF supporting U.S. Army's Pacific Pathways, an initiative to posture Army forces to shape the theater through rotational partner engagements. ARSOF teams have provided local or regional expertise to the brigade prior to the execution of a Pathway event, or have integrated with U.S. conventional forces as advisors or to provide SOF unique capabilities.

BUILDING SOF READINESS FOR OPERATIONS IN ASIA

The complexity of the Indo-Asia-Pacific Theater requires SOF to constantly reassess training and equipment readiness. The sensitivity of the political and economic environment, combined with irregular threats from terrorist groups and the ever-present challenge from very capable adversaries, amplifies the requirement for SOF to build and maintain small and discrete units of action able to maneuver in denied or semi-permissive environments. The readiness demands on units can be daunting given the range of possible crisis or contingency that may arise. Leaders must synthesize the range complexity and focus training on those critical skills and capabilities required to dominate in Asia.

The first challenge is operationalizing language training. The vast cultural and language diversity across

Asia, where roughly 60 percent of the world's population lives and works, has complicated SOF language acquisition and sustainment. SOF formations charged with maintaining regional alignment have often struggled with designating and training target languages. Should units focus on a broad spectrum of languages to maintain flexibility, or should they instead narrow the aperture to a select few critical languages? The way ahead is debatable, but it is clear that ARSOF teams with members trained in up to four to five languages find it difficult to integrate foreign language into collective training. Instead, language is seen as an individual skill trained through annual mandatory classroom instruction and testing. An alternative approach is to build more language homogeneity on teams, and since Mandarin Chinese is spoken and understood widely across Asia this should arguably be the dominant SOF language. The 1st Special Forces Group, for example, is taking steps — with the support of the U.S. Army JFK Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg — to build a deeper Chinese speaking capability amongst Special Forces Soldiers, having a goal of 50 percent of the group manned with Mandarin Chinese speakers in the next five years. The group is maintaining some flexibility with no more than two secondary languages that can be adjusted as needed based on theater requirements.


Advise and assist tasks are the bedrock of many indigenous-partnered operations. In Asia SOF is actively engaged in these tasks with the Armed Forces of the Philippines as they fight violent Islamic extremists in the city of Marawi and across the southern archipelago of Mindanao.⁰⁷ If there is a crisis or conflict on the Korean Peninsula, ARSOF units will likely find themselves advising, assisting, enabling and possibly accompanying ROK SWC forces in a range of special operations. Tasks could include facilitating mission command, planning and intelligence fusion to enabling terminal guidance operations. The evolution in modern indigenous warfare requires SOF units to prioritize C4ISR⁰⁸ and joint terminal attack control capabilities and skills. This may include having to advise and assist a partner force virtually, with organic means, to maintain positive control and situational awareness of the indigenous close fight remotely. It may also involve advising and accompanying partnered forces in support of large-scale conventional maneuver, which requires an appreciation for the growing capabilities of the Joint Force to fight in multi-domain battle. ARSOF's experience in precision, networked-based targeting will also be critical to partner force success on any battlefield.

Conflict with a U.S. peer competitor or adversary presents readiness challenges not seriously considered since the end of the Cold War. Yet in Asia, the Joint

Force may very well have to fight a conflict with very capable opponents like the DPRK, the PRC or even a resurgent Russia. For SOF, this will mean having to operate in denied space, where the local populace may be displaced or sympathetic to U.S. adversaries. Movement to and within this denied operational environment will require less traditional, perhaps disaggregated, techniques often dependent on local indigenous networks. USSF skills in unconventional warfare, CA understanding of governance and counter-governance and MISO abilities to shape and influence key leaders and populations will all be paramount to successful ARSOF operations. Teams will find themselves operating in degraded communications and high-risk survivability environments. Adversaries in Asia have known capabilities to disrupt satellite communications or even to employ weapons of mass destruction. Communications will not be instantaneous and senior leaders will ask teams to assume much greater risk than the U.S. has experienced in the past 16 years of irregular warfare.

All of these challenges place primacy on rapid technological evolution to more effectively integrate and interoperate with partner forces. The current process is slow and cumbersome. A more responsive capabilities development and fielding program is an absolute necessity with authorities for procurement delegated to lower levels than traditionally accepted. The Indo-Asia-Pacific Theater is often touted by senior leaders in PACOM as a 'Theater of Innovation'. SOF units by nature enable a culture of innovation at the lowest levels based on the seniority and maturity of its operators. Commanders should nurture and enable this culture and create mechanism to rapidly respond to critical needs. U.S. strategic interests depend on it.

CONCLUSION

For several decades SOF has engaged across Asia to forge what are now enduring, indigenous military partnerships. This remains a tremendous comparative advantage for the U.S. in the face of adversaries competing for access in influence. SOF must continue to nurture and solidify these relationships, even as national governments face difficult security cooperation decisions that may drive some of their interests towards China or other adversaries. All pillars of ARSOF capability are required to maintain this comparative advantage and provide U.S. senior military and government leaders a range of options to respond to crisis or conflict. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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